

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**ARMY ENLISTED ATTRITION:
WHERE ARE WE, AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

by

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The views expressed in this academic research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

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ABSTRACT

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Manning the force, one of our most important personnel functions, should not be overlooked when preparing or discussing our National Security Strategy. Without a properly manned force, other essential items within that strategy may not come to fruition. Just as manning the force is important, so is manning it with the right mix, the right grades and right skills. The increasing pressure and demands on soldiers have contributed to an already increasing problem in the military, that of attrition. If this problem continues, the future will look suspect in the force mix we put together for the next Peacekeeping Force or Task Force or mission that falls within our National Security Plan. Attrition must be reviewed to determine where we are and where we need to go so an effective strategy of policy changes or adjustments can be developed, as needed. It is shortsighted to look at attrition as a problem we can fix with money or even well-being programs without looking at the major links in the cycle from recruiting, accession, training, and leader responsibilities. Only when we analyze the integral roles and responsibilities of all the players in this cycle will we be able to determine where potential contributors lie to further reduce attrition, and therefore, support the strategic future of our nation.

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**ARMY ENLISTED ATTRITION:
WHERE ARE WE, AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

“People are central to everything else we do in the Army. Institutions don’t transform; people do. Platforms and organizations don’t defend this nation; people do. And finally, units don’t train; they don’t stay ready; they don’t grow and develop leadership; they don’t sacrifice; and they don’t take risks on behalf of the nation; people do.”

—General Eric Shinseki, CSA

THE RELEVANCE OF PERSONNEL TRANSFORMATION TO THE ISSUE OF ATTRITION

The Chief of Staff, Army (CSA) cites three priorities: people, readiness, and transformation. He constantly reminds us that people are the centerpiece and that all other actions are in support of people, our most critical resource.¹ The Army’s personnel community has embraced the CSA transformation vision and has begun looking at legacy and outdated personnel systems and creating tools, programs, policies, and systems to ensure manning, personnel readiness, and well being for the Legacy, Interim, and Objective Forces.² The Army must consider how it recruits and accesses new soldiers and further how leaders train and mentor them. These areas are linked to attrition since the policies and the practices currently followed in each drive how the Army does business, and therefore affect whether soldiers stay or leave.

Transformation rates high on the priority scale for the Army, right behind the war on terrorism, and impacts virtually everyone. The Army’s Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1 has the mission to implement the personnel piece of transformation in line with the CSA vision. Already, initiatives to streamline database management and create a more web-based, soldier interactive personnel system are underway. All of the new and updated systems, however, cannot tell us how to keep our Army manned. The Army’s basic and fundamental enablers are people; they are the centerpiece of the Army and its link to the nation. A force comprised of people from all components--in the right grades with the right skills, with world-class well-being programs--is the foundation of our ready Army. How we acquire, train, develop, distribute, evaluate, promote, sustain, and transition our people represents the human dimension of our transformation.³

Personnel transformation is a “strategic enabler” of Army transformation; therefore, the people piece of transformation must be evaluated and we must determine how we maintain a world-class fighting force.⁴ Maintaining a fighting force means we must look at an issue that has caused concern--that of attrition--more specifically, attrition of our newest recruits from basic

training and soldiers who depart prior to completing their first term of enlistment. With the time, effort, and money invested in attracting personnel to the Army, we must find a way to keep them motivated and willing to stay.

Analyzing attrition involves more than just finding ways to reduce it. We must review the complete cycle from recruiting, accessing, training, and leadership. This paper will focus on the roles and responsibilities of each of the areas, how the Army attracts recruits and the recruiters' role in the process, the policies used to ensure recruits are qualified for military service, how the Army trains them to be soldiers, and finally, how leaders apply motivational tools and interact with soldiers to solidify their commitment to the Army. Typically, parochialism by individuals in various parts of the process may cause defenses to be emplaced, but it will take all proponents working together to determine feasible solutions to reducing attrition.

We need to change how we manage the entire personnel process to achieve an end state of reduced attrition. In Shinseki's words, "If you don't like change, you'll like irrelevance even less."⁵ For the sake of the Army and its soldiers, our most precious resource, the personnel community must look at its internal personnel systems and management, and be the first to step up to the plate with solutions for change.

THE ATTRITION PROBLEM

Over the past two decades, and most dramatically after the force draw down in the late 1980's and early 1990's, attrition has been the subject of increasing concern, specifically, initial entry training (IET) and first term attrition. Prior to 2000, the Department of the Army (DA) had set bands of acceptable attrition rates for IET (refers to soldiers who do not complete their initial entry training and therefore do not make it to their first unit of assignment) and active component unit attrition or first term attrition (refers to initial term soldiers who depart the Army before serving a full term). Those bands were set at 12-14 percent and 5-7 percent respectively and were based on reviews of data from previous years.⁶ Because the CSA felt that those standards were no longer appropriate, in light of the numerous soldier support programs implemented, he opted to do away with the bands and establish new standards. The new standards of 12 percent for IET and 5 percent for active component unit attrition were the lower end of the bands previously established by Department of the Army.⁷

The General Accounting Office (GAO) estimates that the early separation of new recruits, those not fulfilling a contractual obligation of enlistment, is costly in that the services' recruiting and training investment in each enlistee averages almost \$38,000.⁸ Besides training and recruiting, the \$38,000 also includes the cost of salary, unemployment compensation, and

veterans' benefits expenditures. These are just the monetary costs associated with attrition. What is not seen and captured by dollars is the cost on unit morale, as other soldiers continue to see the exodus of individuals in which they have invested their time and friendship, and ultimately on overall force instability. Some individuals are lost due to medical conditions or disabilities, adverse reasons, training failure, drug use, behavior disorders, alcoholism, acquired civil court convictions, motivational problems, financial irresponsibility, and other types of misconduct, all of which Department of the Army has begun to intensively track. The charts below lists the most common causes of loss and percentage of loss by category for fiscal year 2002.

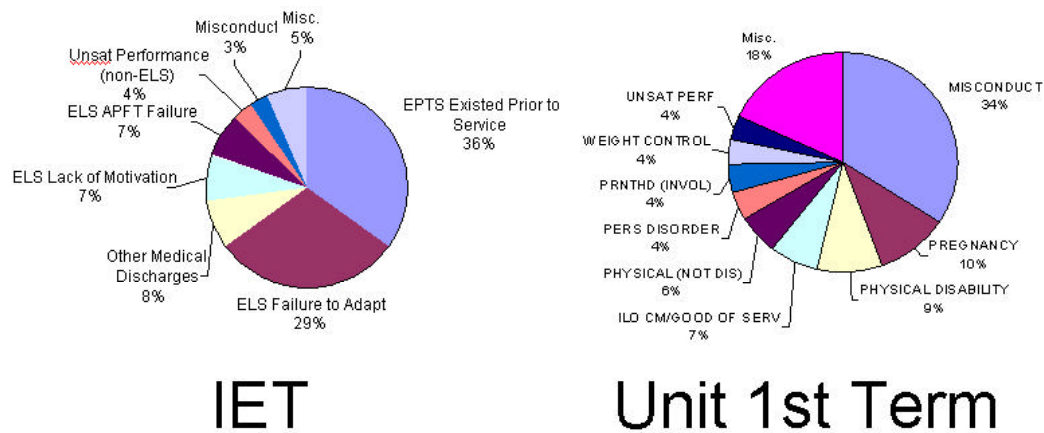


FIGURE 1: CAUSES OF LOSS

First-term attrition is measured through the 36th month of service. There are now shorter periods of enlistments, used to boost recruiting efforts, but statistics have not yet been compiled. For the Fiscal Year (FY) 01 cohort, first-term attrition (includes both IET and unit attrition) was 32.5 percent. Although that looks to be a relatively small increase from the FY 99 and FY 00 cohorts which were 32.1 percent and 31.5 percent respectively, to put it in perspective, one percent equates to approximately 700 soldiers in the training base and 1300 soldiers for unit attrition.⁹ The CSA's established manning objectives for the two categories, IET and unit attrition, have come none to soon. The most recent data, for attrition statistics through September 2002, showed IET attrition at 14.55 percent and active component attrition rate at 6.98 percent, both at the high end of the previously established bands.¹⁰ The charts below highlight the attrition trends for the training base and units through September 2002.

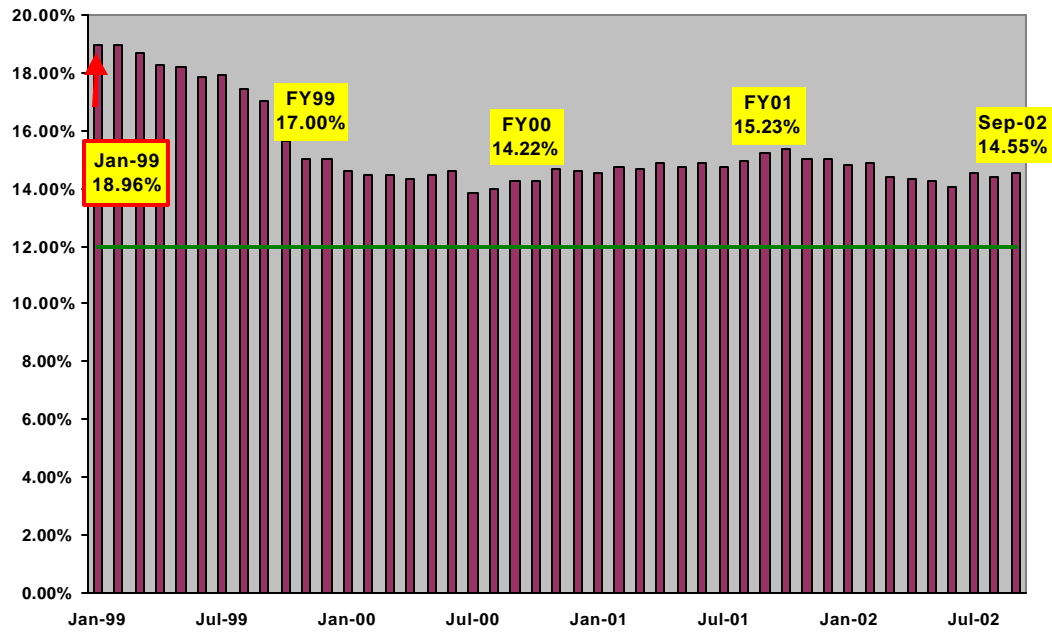


FIGURE 2. ANNUAL TRAINING BASE ATTRITION

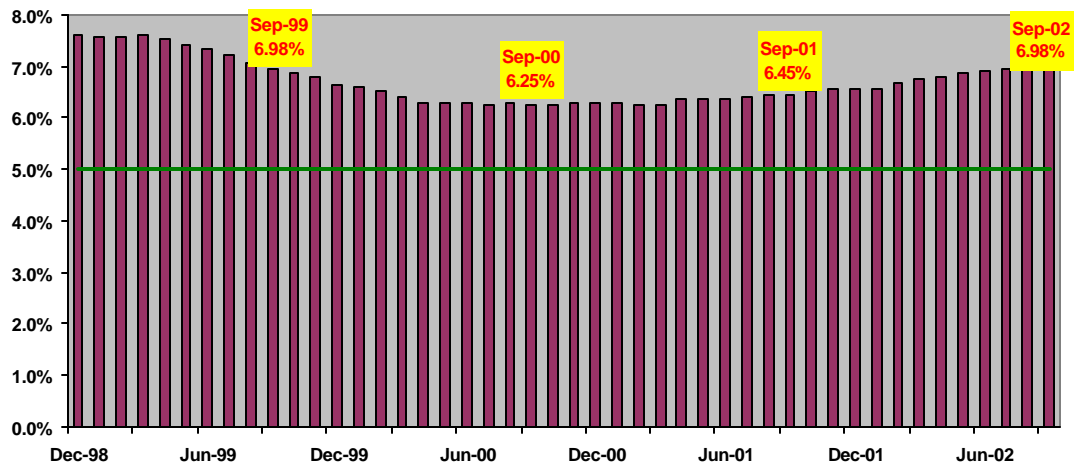


FIGURE 3. ANNUAL UNIT ATTRITION

MANAGING ATTRITION

The primary indicator of recruit success is how successful the recruit was in basic or undergraduate education; the “primary means through which attrition is managed is through the application of education credential screens.”¹¹ A recent Human Resources Research study

indicated a previous report showed there was already a well-established and reliable relationship between first term attrition and educational credential.¹² Approximately 80 percent of traditional high school graduates complete their obligated enlistment period, whereas the comparable rate is only 60 percent for alternate credential holders (General Educational Diploma or GED) and dropouts.¹³

The Army has begun looking at all causes of attrition and determining what management tools must be used to control it. The implementation of soldier support programs in FY 98 caused a slight decrease in attrition. Since FY 00, attrition rates for IET and first term attrition have remained somewhat stable, with minor percentage increases and decreases, yet still above established DA standards. Therefore attrition must be analyzed fully and underlying causes studied in detail to determine a strategy of policy changes or adjustments, and to determine at what level they must be implemented. It is shortsighted to envision attrition as a single issue that has the propensity to change solely based on educational credential. It is imperative that the starting point be an examination of recruiting policies and practices and their relationship to attrition.

RECRUITING RELATIONSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Until 2001, the Army struggled to meet its recruiting goal.¹⁴ Prior to that time, the recruiting shortfalls were exacerbated by the already significant attrition rates. While the Army was struggling to meet recruiting goals, studies were being conducted to look at ways to increase retention. A GAO report, June 2000, assessed recruiting shortfalls and historical efforts to reduce attrition rates for first-term enlistees as dual and linked studies.¹⁵ Their study found that the Army challenge to implement recruiting initiatives brought an increase in the number of recruiters, their advertising budgets, larger enlistment bonuses for longer periods of service, and more money for college. This began addressing the recruiting shortfall, as these tools had been shown by past research to help services attract new recruits, but did little to look at the effort needed to retain soldiers.¹⁶ Additionally, the Army also announced that it would expand its recruiting market to target youth who did not have high school diplomas but were considered to have a higher than average aptitude score and no histories of disciplinary problems. The market would also extend to community colleges since those students were considered to not have fully realized what their future held or to have fully defined their goals. Department of Defense (DOD) established recruiting benchmarks for high school diploma graduates for the services at 90 percent, with 60 percent of that number scoring in the top half the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB).¹⁷ The Army has typically hit this

benchmark, but in October 2000 under the five-year DOD pilot program, home-schooled graduates and GED holders who graduated from the National Guard Youth Challenge Program were included in this number.¹⁸ Since it is a recent initiative, the Army has not fully captured the data or been able to analyze it to determine how well this new category of recruits performs or their retainability. Since the retention rate, through first-term of enlistment, for non-high school diploma youth has been historically low, the Army began, in conjunction with these recruiting initiatives, to administer the Assessment of Individual Motivation (AIM) along with the ASVAB at the Military Entrance Processing Stations (MEPS).¹⁹

The AIM test, designed by the Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, assists in identifying people who are likely to perform well while in the military and more likely to complete their term of service. It consists of a battery of questions asking recruits about past behaviors and preferences and attempts to measure dependability, adjustment, athletic interest, and achievement orientation.²⁰ The study accompanying the test is designed to monitor and track the recruits through basic training to see how successful they were. The Institute expects to track and then further study those who took the test, anticipating their results will show that those recruits who had a high motivations index on the test will have low attrition. If the AIM data, which has not been released, substantiates the above premise, then the Army may have found a credible tool to consider in predicting, and therefore better managing, attrition.

RECRUITER – ENLISTEE RELATIONSHIP

With recruiting initiatives underway, the relationship between recruiter and potential enlistee needed examining. This relationship is important in that the recruiter has the ability to screen applicants prior to bringing them to the MEPS and actually “gauge” their quality. A recruiter's preliminary screen, if conducted properly, helps ensure ineligible recruits are not forwarded to the MEPS and helps pinpoint specific histories that could possibly lead to a fraudulent enlistment.²¹ A GAO review of the screening processes indicated they were not working since insufficient incentives and checks existed to ensure that the services were actually recruiting qualified personnel.²² GAO felt that recruiters have a built-in conflict of interest and no adequate incentive to ensure their recruits are fully qualified.²³ Further, although recruiters are expected to recruit only quality personnel, their performance is judged primarily on the number of recruits they enlist.²⁴

In a 1997 testimony to the Subcommittee on Military Personnel, GAO stated that the “services do not provide recruiters with adequate incentives to ask applicants probing questions

that might reveal disqualifying information.”²⁵ Asking probing questions leads to complications for recruiters. First, if recruiters uncover potentially disqualifying information about their applicants, they create more paperwork for themselves in that they must request waivers. Second, recruiters might have to reject applicants who are not qualified and consequently miss their monthly goals.²⁶

At the request of the Senate Committee on Armed Services Subcommittee on Personnel, GAO developed several recommendations to determine why the attrition of enlisted personnel during their first terms of duty remained relatively constant, yet high, despite the increased quality of new recruits and further, to analyze the management and selection of recruiters and their impact on attrition. A GAO (June 2000) report included: (1) a report outlining numerous reasons for attrition during the enlistees' first 6 months of service, (2) a report recommending how recruiter selections and incentive systems could be improved to increase recruiter performance, and the likelihood that enlistees will complete their first terms, (3) a report detailing reasons for enlisted attrition after basic training, and (4) a better process of screening incoming recruits to detect criminal backgrounds.²⁷ The reports outlined 20 recommendations on ways DOD could improve its management of recruiter incentive systems, its process of screening incoming recruits, and its retention of first-term enlistees. One such recommendation was the revision of recruiter incentive systems to reward for recruits graduating from basic training. GAO's follow-on work was to evaluate the progress DOD and the services made in implementing previous recommendations.

The Army response to an improved recruiter incentive system was that it had just revised that system and recruiters were now awarded points when recruits graduate from basic training.²⁸ A review of the U. S. Army Recruiting Command's (USAREC) annual award recognition categories and criteria indeed shows a link between recruiter and station with the lowest attrition from basic training to recognition by the CSA. What it does not show is an important link from recruiter mission to a recruit's graduation from basic training. Army recruiters' missions and incentives are still based on the number of recruits accessed in the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), and the number of recruits shipped to the training base.²⁹ An important link to reducing attrition is developing a program that ties mission credit to basic training graduation, therefore holding recruiters accountable for a more active role in the total recruit-accession process. Recruiter goals are driven by end-strength numbers and budget allocations. They are also connected to the numbers of slots for basic training and follow-on training so recruiters must keep a steady and constant flow of enlisted personnel into the Army.

The U.S. Marine Corps has married these two links, recruiter mission credit and basic training graduation, and has ultimately focused the entire Marine Corps, not just the training base and leaders, on manning the force. The Marine ethos for recruiting focuses on four areas: number of contracts written, the DEP attrition, how many recruits successfully ship to basic training, and successful completion of basic training. They have established a system that tracks recruits from each district, and from the actual recruiter, to the training base. If a recruit attrits, the reason is cited and the station is notified of the attrition. If a pattern exists where one recruiter is having several recruits attrit, then it is further studied to determine if the recruiter is taking short cuts in his job and not screening a recruit as adequately as he/she should. Further, the attrition is reviewed in conjunction with waivers to see if a recruiter or district is continually sending recruits in from waiver categories. The idea is to eliminate waivers if possible, especially moral character waivers, and focus on quality. Finally, a major change, they feel, in reducing attrition was linking the responsibility for recruiting and recruit training under the same commander so he or she had a vested interest in both areas.³⁰

Army Recruiting Command recently developed a DEP sustainment program that prepares new soldiers for entry into IET. The attempt is to get soldiers physically and mentally prepared for basic training, relieving some of the anxiety and fear of basic training as well as having the individual prepared on certain tasks they will encounter at training. They focus heavily on values training as well as commitment when talking to new recruits and motivating them to stay in the DEP program. Once a recruiter brings an individual to the Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS), the second step and one of the most important steps in their qualification process, takes place.

MILITARY ENTRANCE PROCESSING COMMAND

The MEPS primary mission as outlined in Army Regulation (AR) 601-27 is to examine applicants' aptitudes and physical qualifications for enlistment in the Armed Forces in accordance with eligibility standards established by the services and to enlist those accepted. In this respect, they administer the ASVAB; prepare and conduct quality review of service enlistment documents; interview applicants for the purpose of assisting recruiting services in the prevention of fraudulent entry into the armed services; and fingerprint applicants and forward fingerprints and personal information to Defense Investigative Services (DIS).³¹

Of major concern to the MEPS is the conduct of the physical that they perform on all potential enlistees. It is a lengthy process, which unfortunately relies heavily on the applicant to truthfully disclose any physical or mental information about themselves which could affect their

enlistment. In 1998, medical and physical problems accounted for 23 percent of separations for enlistees in their first 6 months of service.³² As of August 2002, medical conditions such as personality disorders and conditions that existed prior to service (EPTS) still remain in the top ten reasons for early separation at 36 percent of the total attritions.³³

GAO cited in their February 2000 report that the MEPS have made every attempt to improve the medical screening of enlistees during their physical examinations and that DOD had already adopted prior recommendations to revise the medical form used to gather historical medical information on applicants for military service. DOD, through the MEPS, had also imposed the requirement on military applicants to list their medical providers and insurers in hopes that applicants would more readily report their past medical histories if they believed that the services would try to verify information they provided. Ultimately, the addition of medical screening tests such as for asthma, currently ongoing at the Baltimore MEPS, will help to screen out medical conditions known to be high attrition risks.

Additionally, the MEPS have instituted procedures to begin collecting more precise information on the medical reasons for which enlistees were being separated early; they have expanded greatly the list of medical codes used to identify physical/medical factors on applicants which are permanently disqualifying and will require a waiver. Accurate collection of data will, at some point, enable DOD and the services to make informed decisions on which medical conditions result in greater or lesser attrition rates. Currently, the codes used to identify reasons for separation from the training base are vague and more than one code can be used to classify the same separation. Until a more concise coding system is implemented for separations throughout all services, DOD does not have the ability to make cross service attrition comparisons or to formulate fact-based policy changes to reduce it.

Waivers can be granted by the services for otherwise disqualifying conditions identified by MEPS medical personnel. The Accession Medical Standards Analysis and Research Activity (AMSARA) conducted studies investigating how those enlistees waived for specific medical conditions have performed on active duty. In a comparison of those waivers, they believe the statistics demonstrate that those enlistees granted waivers for specific medical conditions such as asthma, history of Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and history of Anterior Crucial Ligament (ACL) injury or repair are retained statistically longer on active duty than those who had not had any condition waived. Additionally, 85 percent of enlistees separated under the EPTS category occur among those who purposely withheld information on medical conditions requiring a waiver during a MEPS physical.³⁴

The Army, through the Human Resources Research Organization, has studied the attrition rate of first term soldiers who were granted authority to enlist in the military with a waiver. The information on physical waivers did not suggest that soldiers attrited faster than those without a waiver. However, the presence of moral character waivers (MCW), in a September 2002 study, showed an effect on attrition but was weakly associated with a three-month attrition, which was the focus of the study. Previous research had documented higher attrition rates for individuals with a MCW.³⁵

The three-month study identified actions that needed to be taken at the services' MEPS liaison level (i.e., correctly classifying waivers and annotating the number of waivers per individual) leading to a development of a common classification system for MCW across the services. The results on attrition may be too immature to be conclusive.

The three-month attrition is a very limited measure of service member success. A more mature attrition criterion (e.g., 6 months, 1 year) or other performance criteria (e.g., job performance, ratings, promotion scores, disciplinary actions, in-service violations) may reveal different or stronger relationships between pre-service behaviors and service member success.³⁶

This study is important and causes some concern in that the issue of moral character waivers has created some consternation at MEPS, Reception Stations, and with commanders. It needs to be fully studied for a longer length of time to understand if there is something we should change about how the Army does business. The same COHORT group used previously in the study would be good starting point without reinventing the wheel. We may find that we need to further define the types and categories of all types of waivers.

An ongoing concern during the MEPS physical is the disclosure or nondisclosure of mental disorders and the corresponding rate of early separations from military service from said disorders. Although difficult to diagnose, mental disorders that can encompass anything from personality disorders to alcohol and substance abuse, have remained consistently in the top five leading reasons for first-term attrition. Nearly 50 percent of personnel hospitalized for the first time for a mental disorder left military service within 6 months, compared with only 12 percent of those hospitalized for other reasons.³⁷

Mental disorders and the corresponding attrition are on the rise and cannot be overlooked. The American Psychiatric Association study published in September 2002, encompassing over ten years of study, found that mental disorders were the fifth leading category of medical separations for the military between 1990 and 1993 behind musculoskeletal conditions, digestive system conditions, pregnancy related conditions, and injuries. They became the third

leading cause in 1995. By 1997, 27 percent of military personnel seen on an outpatient basis for mental disorders left active duty within six months after their first visit.³⁸ Since mental disorders have become the “catch-all” phrase for several conditions, it is difficult to determine just how many first term attrition separations actually fall under this category. There is no consistency by unit on how mental disorders are captured and in what category they are labeled.

For the past five years of the study, 1995 to 1999, mental disorders were the second leading hospital discharge diagnostic category. The most common diagnoses under this category were alcohol and substance abuse disorders, adjustment disorders, and personality disorders.³⁹ The fact that this discharge category is so high and is the fifth leading category of attrition is cause for concern. Mental disorders are seldom voluntarily disclosed during the MEPS physical and there is no system to check if an applicant is intentionally withholding information. The MEPS is not required to check insurance provider information, which could possibly verify this information.

The Walter Reed Army Research Center sent a team to the Baltimore MEPS in January 2002 to request assistance from the MEPS Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Neurological consult doctor in developing a written test which may assist in identifying applicants with mental disorders. With mental disorders being the most important source of medical and occupational morbidity among active duty military personnel, it seems imperative that a conclusive test be developed and implemented immediately.⁴⁰

FRAUDULENT AND ERRONEOUS ENLISTMENTS

Recruits can be separated for fraudulent enlistment if they knowingly conceal information that would disqualify them from military service. Concealment of number of dependents, lying about prior drug use, or failing to report a medical or criminal disqualifying condition, can all lead to a discharge under this category. In a 1998 GAO report, it was determined that fraudulent/erroneous enlistment contributed to 26 percent of attrition during the first 6 months of service.⁴¹ Both the recruiting services and the MEPS need to be diligent in capturing prior medical history of military applicants.

The concealment of criminal backgrounds could present an even greater problem than the nondisclosure of medical history. In almost all cases where information on an applicant's criminal background was withheld, to include an expunged or sealed juvenile record, the applicant had already been accessed in the DEP, without a moral character waiver, and had

either started and in some cases completed basic training and transferred to his/her permanent duty station.

Applicants who are initially denied entry into the DEP program have voluntarily disclosed some medical or criminal history that will either permanently disqualify them or require a service waiver prior to enlistment. When applicants knowingly conceal information, no system exists to prevent them from being accessed into the DEP. Without the information, it is assumed that applicants have met all aptitude and physical requirements and are deemed fully qualified to be accessed into the Army DEP program.

The addition of automated fingerprint machines in the MEPS allows it to send fingerprints on line immediately to the Defense Investigative Service (DIS). It also ensures that the fingerprints are accurately scanned so they can not be misinterpreted when received. Unfortunately, it is not a requirement for this information to be reviewed by DIS, only sent, prior to enlistment into the DEP and in most cases the results from submission of fingerprints is not received back to the MEPS prior to an individual shipping to basic training. The time required to conduct a background investigation is extensive and normally exceeds the time an applicant remains in the DEP status. By the time applicants are shipped to basic training, the \$38,000 price tag has already started tabulating.

RECEPTION STATION –BASIC TRAINING

The annual attrition rate from the training base peaked at 19.03 percent in December 1998 and declined to 14.40 percent in August 2002, accounting for nearly half of first-term attrition. It was felt that the addition of soldier support programs in 1998 may have assisted in the decline. However, more work was needed since attrition rates remained above the DA mandated standards. A GAO study, February 2000, concluded that most early separations, with the exception of the EPTS category, are for performance problems, such as failure of physical training test, loss of motivation, physical injuries, or inability to adapt to military life.⁴² For FY 2002, those categories still remained the top reasons for first term attrition. The members of the GAO study group visited the four training bases which were all working to reduce attrition due to performance problems.

Although it is too early to see if any difference has been realized since the FY 2002 statistics, it is hoped that the training bases will begin to see a reduction in training base attrition due to the inclusion of some recent soldier support programs. Ongoing initiatives include the following:

- Special Training and Holding Units – designed to maximize the potential benefits of rehabilitative training for those soldiers who might otherwise separate early.
- Fitness Training Units – designed to assist in increasing fitness levels and reducing injuries of at-risk soldiers.
- Physical Training Rehabilitative Programs – designed for the professional assessment and treatment of injuries to allow soldiers to successfully recover and return to an acceptable level of fitness.
- Remedial Training – designed for those who initially fail to meet standards (with the intent to keep those soldiers with their peers until graduation).
- The New Start Program – designed as a last resort if remedial training fails to get the enlistee to meet minimum standards.⁴³

All of the efforts include providing extra attention to recruits struggling during basic training and disciplining and working with enlistees who have completed training and are experiencing minor behavioral problems. Although these actions appear promising, GAO feels that the services have yet to develop the tools needed to measure the long-term success of their efforts. This limits their ability to judge the effectiveness of those efforts in reducing attrition.⁴⁴

LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

Leaders are directly involved in reducing first term attrition through implementation of programs at basic training and by providing a positive and similarly conducive environment after basic training. The responsibility for soldier care and programs lies with leaders at all levels, from team leaders to the highest ranking individuals who can impact congressional decisions and policy.

GAO analyzed the results of a 1999 DOD survey of active duty personnel. This was a twofold survey, which cited reasons for joining the service and reasons for leaving the service for first term enlistees. The top five reasons first term soldiers gave for joining the service included: education benefits (43 percent), training for civilian employment (18 percent), travel and experiences (18 percent), personal growth (15 percent), and lastly, to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives (14 percent).⁴⁵

Similarly, the survey addressed the retention issues with the understanding that retention decisions are complex, highly personal decisions. The survey found that most service members base their decisions to stay or leave the military on their overall experiences, as well as their perceptions of military and civilian opportunities.

The results further cited that across-the-board pay and allowances increases do little to address specific retention problems because these problems are often focused in certain occupations, career stages, and grades. Additionally, less than one percent of service members cited housing allowances as a top reason to leave the military.⁴⁶

GAO, in June 2001, reported that enlisted personnel in retention critical skills, those most needed in the military, did not intend to leave the military at a greater rate than did other enlisted personnel. However, if those enlisted personnel possess a highly marketable skill, they would be more likely to leave for more attractive civilian opportunities.⁴⁷

The primary reasons service members cited for leaving or considering leaving the military were their basic pay, the amount of personal and family time, and the quality of leadership. There is a perception from first-term soldiers that many aspects of civilian life are better than military life. This unfortunately, has only been reinforced with the number of deployments soldiers have been facing in the last few years. Additionally, 70 percent believed that civilians were better compensated and had a better quality of life. This perception tends to change based on the state of the economy at the time of the survey.⁴⁸

It is important to recognize that leaders can impact climate and can address first-term reasons for leaving at their level. Leaders have tools such as counseling, mentoring, and positive leadership skills they can use at all times. How they intend to use these tools will make the difference in a young soldiers' desire to stay or leave the military.

Morale, cohesiveness, and esprit-de-corps can be impacted at the lowest level of command. Too often, Army leaders view low morale *only* as an impediment to accomplishment of a complex and dangerous mission rather than seeing it also as dissatisfaction of military life or a lack of appreciation for soldiers' contributions to the unit. Once a soldier becomes disgruntled or feels worthless and unappreciated, he or she may present the leadership with disciplinary challenges until the decision is made to discharge them.

Another factor affecting morale, and consequently retention, is that of racial, minority, and ethnic extremism. The Armed Forces Equal Opportunity Office (EO) conducted a survey throughout the military on the impact of extremism on soldier job satisfaction, pride, and unit cohesion and found that exposure to extremism had a significant impact in all of these categories.⁴⁹ The study further indicated that regardless of race or ethnicity, whenever respondents experienced extremist situations, the number of soldiers indicating they were unlikely to remain in the Army increased. All racial categories indicated that soldiers were less inclined to reenlist if they experienced extremist situations. White soldiers reported the lowest inclination to reenlist before and after extremist events with Hispanics ranking second. When it

came to the impact of extremism on inclination to remain in the military, blacks appear to be the racial group least affected. The study attributed this to the perception that the racial climate for blacks is better within the military than in society at large.⁵⁰

For the Army, teamwork is crucial which makes extremism an important factor in determining an individual's motivation to stay in the Army. Much of the Army's indoctrination process is designed to prepare individuals to work collectively toward a common goal. Unit efficiency and effectiveness are dependent on synchronized group ability, a concept that infers common vision, shared values, and trust that combine in the concept of cohesion.⁵¹ If the team or the unit is affected by extremism and does not see leaders attempting to fix the problem, then the effect is felt in its members' motivation to stay in the Army.

Mentorship is an important and somewhat lost tool that leaders have and fail to use. Mentors can motivate and drive soldiers to reach greater levels of success and positively influence retention. The support, understanding, and positive role modeling received through mentorship can be the deciding factor in a soldier's decision to stay in the Army.⁵²

WHERE ARE WE, AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The attrition rate for enlistees entering the service in the mid to late 1980's hovered between 30 and 34 percent, and this rate gradually rose in the 1990's from a low of 33 percent to a peak of nearly 37 percent for enlistees entering in fiscal years 1994 and 1995.⁵³ The Army has watched those gradual decreases and increases and continued to develop programs to influence the trends. For the most part, those programs have worked well and today the Army's overall attrition rate is hovering around 30 percent. But, this is still not within the acceptable standards established by the Department of the Army and we need to do more. Given that the Army is now heavily involved in Transformation, which involves multiple and complex initiatives by the personnel community as well as all others, we need to control the exodus of first term soldiers – the people who will carry us into a transformed and evolutionary force.

The Army has made changes in soldier separation policy aimed at maintaining Army end strength. The provision was lifted which allowed regular Army soldiers, either first term or subsequent enlistment, with a local bar to reenlistment to request voluntary separation. Old separation policies implemented to minimize involuntary loss programs during the drawdown years were no longer needed. The focus was changed to support sustainment of current force levels and maintain a quality force while reducing attrition.⁵⁴

With few exceptions, commanders must now rehabilitatively transfer, at least once before initiating separation, all soldiers in an entry level status (defined by regulation as the first 180

days of active duty) who face separation due to unsatisfactory performance or conduct, as well as all first term enlisted soldiers facing separation for unsatisfactory performance. The transfer is designed to occur between battalion size units or if in a training environment, between training companies or platoons. Commanders still have the prerogative to waive rehabilitative transfer requirements if they firmly believe the transfer will serve no useful purpose.⁵⁵

The Buddy Team Assignment Program (BTAP) is a pilot program initiated by the Chief of Infantry. It involves assigning two soldiers designated as a buddy team in One Station Unit Training (OSUT), to the lowest level, preferably squad level, at their first duty station. The program is designed to provide them with a more positive experience in their first few months of service by allowing them to remain with a soldier they have bonded or become familiar with.⁵⁶

A recent initiative by Army Recruiting Command, Partnership For Youth Success, provides an opportunity for individuals, businesses, and the U.S. Army to benefit from a successful enlistment. Prior to enlistment, the individual is linked to a pre-selected employer (one who has agreed to be part of the program) who he/she will join with or in some cases return to after a successful enlistment. The tour in the Army will allow them to receive the hands-on training to prepare them to work for their perspective employer. The Army says it is finding jobs for thousands of youth with the program.⁵⁷

Army Secretary Thomas White has the Army G-1 looking at changing the assignment and replacement system, to move from an individual replacement system to a unit manning system. This could be a sweeping success or it could be a replay of the failures of the COHORT system, which ended in the early 1990's. The study and development of the new system is being worked. The objective of the system is to create more cohesive units, a more stable situation for our soldiers and families, and therefore higher readiness levels and possibly decreased attrition levels. If implemented successfully, it could turn out to be a reform that increases a sense of belonging that soldiers feel is lacking in the fast-paced environment today. It will take soldiers who have been trained together and allow them to remain together for longer periods of time.⁵⁸

Along with this unit rotation initiative, it is expected that families will have a sense of permanency in increased home basing. If units move on a rotational basis and for shorter periods of time, the need to continually uproot families may not be necessary. Since family considerations are a major factor in a soldier's desire to stay in the military, we could see first-term soldier attrition decreasing. Whatever steps we take in this direction, the goal should have as desired effects less turbulence and more unit cohesion.

The Army's moral character waiver (MCW) standards affect various dimensions of military performance, of which attrition is but one. A September 2002 study revealed that the Army's MCW policy showed room for improvement.⁵⁹ Several recommendations regarding policy change were made from the data gathered from the 3-month attrition study. A common theme throughout the study was the need for specificity of waiver codes. Currently, no link exists between Service-specific moral character waiver categories, as published by Recruiting Command, and waiver codes listed on Department of Defense Form 1966 (DD1966).⁶⁰ Since MEPS are required to enter the waiver codes on DD1966, while preparing enlistment packets using DOD waiver categories, a formal link must be developed to eliminate subjectivity in translating policy on the part of the Army and the MEPS. To strengthen this process, and to eliminate the apparent subjectivity, it is necessary to expand the focus of the research to include: (1) a longer and more extensive analysis of the individuals in the study, (2) a policy-capturing study to determine what criteria decision makers use to decide whether to approve waivers for those recruits who require one for entry into the Army, and (3) development of a common classification theme to provide linkage between recruiting policy and DOD policy.⁶¹

The information found on mental disorders in relation to attrition is disturbing. The fact that it is consistently a top five category of attrition bears attention. Clearly, there is a need to further separate categories currently listed under mental disorders (e.g., alcohol and substance abuse, adjustment disorders). It is imperative that we capture exactly what is occurring in this category to further address what steps or solutions can be implemented. The study published by the American Journal of Psychology, in September 2002, was very extensive and captured over ten years of data. That information should be a starting point on what we need to further define.⁶²

Leader interaction and positive mentorship is a must. Leaders have to know what is occurring in their units and with their personnel. They must be capable of providing soldiers the opportunities to develop skills, build confidence, and obtain guidance and counseling.⁶³ They cannot use the excuse of being too busy or having too many other important things to consider and avoid being the positive role model soldiers need. Mentoring requires investment in terms of time and effort on the part of the mentor and the soldier but this is balanced by the benefits both they and the organization gain.⁶⁴ Numerous studies and exit surveys continue to cite leadership as a reason for attrition. The Army and its leaders are accountable for the Army's most precious resource – people.

Extremism and the impact on attrition should remain a concern. Equal Opportunity personnel are continually gathering updated information to provide to the Army. Equal

Opportunity representatives provide very detailed training aids to teach soldiers and leaders about the different types of extremist groups that exist. Training alone is not the answer. This is an area that we must attack hard as the effect is felt in all races, sexes, and grades. Leaders must show quickly that racism will not be tolerated and individuals will be swiftly disciplined. Only when soldiers see that it is intolerable will it stop.

The Army must determine if it is viable to hold recruiters to a higher standard, in other words, to link their mission and their performance to the graduation success of their recruit from basic training. The Marines imposed this standard on their recruiters and feel that it has made an immeasurable difference in the quality of their recruits and in reducing attrition.

The Army has to ensure the tools it develops measure the long-term success of its efforts and it needs to take the time to gather the data required and further analyze it to gauge the effectiveness of the efforts. Without a history of what works with today's recruits, the Army must document how well precise combinations of benefits and bonuses result in maximum retention of enlistees. It takes time to measure effectiveness but in the long term it will be worth the effort. This FY 2003, if the Army has tracked all of its initiatives, it will be able to study the enlistees who came in FY 99 and apply those lessons learned to a new set of enlistees, as it takes about 48 months to get long term results.

The Army continues to experience an attrition challenge that calls for increased attention and focused resources. Improvement efforts need to be analyzed as we continue to determine root causes of attrition. Over the long term, the Army should attempt to ensure that its programs do not simply delay attrition.

We must keep pace with an ever-changing force and as we continue our efforts to adapt, "we cannot lose sight of the fact that our Army family – our people – remain the key factor in whatever ventures we engage in." ⁶⁵

Word Count: = 7255

ENDNOTES

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⁴ Ibid.,4.

⁵ Ibid.,11.

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²⁵ Ibid.

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²⁹ U.S. Army Recruiting Command. "Command Annual Awards Recognition Categories and Criteria, effective RSM April 99" Memorandum for all Brigade and Battalion Commanders, 29 March 1999.

³⁰ The ideas in this paragraph are based on remarks made by a speaker participating as a guest lecture in a Term II warfighting elective.

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³⁸ Ibid.

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⁴⁰ Ibid.

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⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ George Reed, Impact of Racial and Ethnic Extremism upon Organizational Retention, Morale and Efficiency, unpublished doctoral dissertation, page 104.

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⁵¹ Ibid., 116.

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